

# Delia Dean

## Butts In

by

### Berton Braley



A SLENDER, graceful girl in a natty, dark brown tailored suit alighted from the street-car near the plate-glass windows and speckless white front of the Home Grocery. From under her pert little hat there were glimpses of red-brown hair, and a pair of alert sparkling-brown eyes looked upon the world—or that part of it represented by the main street of Midvale—with approval.

"Smart little suburban burg," observed Delia Dean, as the car went its way and the conductor glanced back at her with a final look that registered tribute. "Figree Biscuit ought to play to S. R. O. here."

She swung across the street, her suitcase in her hand, with a lithe ease that bespoke supple muscles and vigorous health, and entered the grocery door. A clerk met her, with what is known as a pleasant commercial smile.

"What can I do for you?" he queried.

"That's easy," responded Delia, "you can organize yourself into a searching party of one and discover the whereabouts of the main squeeze in this outfit. My information from the secret service tells me that his name is Orchard—though it doesn't say what kind of an Orchard."

"Oh," said the clerk, "you want to see Mr. Orchard."

"You have me, Mr. Stevenson," agreed Delia. "Your powers of deduction are worthy of notice. I shall speak to the Secretary of War and see if he can't give you a job decoding ciphers in the intelligence department."

The clerk looked at Delia's suitcase suspiciously.

"I heard him say this morning," he said, "that he was all stocked up and wasn't going to be in the market for some time."

"The marines have an office down the street, I noticed as I came up," Delia told him, "and they might be interested in your

information. I'm not. Please tell Mr. Orchard that Miss Delia Dean, of the Filigree Biscuit Company, has arrived on the scene, prepared to demonstrate the superior qualities of the best food in the market to a palpitant throng, and that she would like to see him and learn where to locate the heavy artillery for the drive."

She set down her suit-case and stood, waiting. The clerk hesitated and then proceeded to the rear of the store whence he returned in a moment with the proprietor, a full-fed, round-faced, red-cheeked individual that anybody would know for a grocer even if disguised in the garb of a grand duke.

"How do you do, Miss Dean," he beamed, "I have been looking for you."

"Your scout was somewhat asleep on the job then," commented Delia crisply, with a grin at the clerk, "but now we're all here together, I'd like to get busy."

"Certainly," said Orchard, "Arkins, get a table for Miss Dean."

"I didn't see your taxi," he explained, as the clerk departed, "or I would have met you myself."

"Strange," Delia replied, "it stopped almost in front of the store. Then it went on up the track."

"You came up on the car," the grocer observed reprovingly, "with that heavy suit-case?"

"It isn't any heavier in a street-car than in a taxi," Delia told him, "and I'm pretty much off of taxis, anyhow. I'm buying war-stamps with the fare I save and the Filigree Company lets me charge up the difference in expenses just the same. Patriotism is the silent partner in our outfit."

"That's very fine," said Orchard. "I've been trying to do my bit, also. I've subscribed quite heavily to all the Liberty Loans."

"Good man," Delia commended him, "and now that's settled I'll just unpack my stuff and get on the job."

She unfolded a spotless linen cloth and placed it over the table the clerk brought her, set up the cocoa-boiler, piled a few packages of various kinds of Filigree products in orderly fashion about the table, opened a box or two, and after putting the

dainty cream-pitcher and the sugar-bowl where she wanted them, closed the suit-case and handed it to the clerk with the request that he hide it somewhere.

"Now," she advised the grocer, "if you'll sell me a bottle of cream and a package of cocoa and tell me where I can get some water to fill this boiler with, you needn't do anything more until the frantic mob I shall educate in the virtues of Filigree storms your counter to buy."

"What do I owe you for this?" Delia asked a few minutes later when the cream and cocoa had been placed before her.

"The cream is sixty cents a pint," said Orchard, "and the cocoa is fifty cents."

"Listen," protested Delia, "you understand I just want ordinary cream, not cream with pearl dust in it, and I asked for cocoa, not powdered gold."

"Things are very high now, you know," the grocer answered, "on account of the war."

"Yes," said Delia, "but cream, wholesale, costs around thirty or forty cents a pint, and the wholesale price of this particular brand of cocoa happens to be eighteen cents a package. I know, because usually the firm supplies me with it, only this morning I ran out."

Orchard looked somewhat sheepish.

"Well, of course," he conceded, "I might shade those prices for you a little, inasmuch as you are sort of in the business. Suppose we make the cream forty-five cents and the cocoa thirty cents."

"Suppose we do," agreed Delia, and lighted the alcohol burner under the cocoa urn as the clerk brought her water to fill it.

The cocoa was boiling merrily when two women customers entered the store. Delia gave them her friendly smile—a smile that was as real and honest as the clerk's was false—and called out cheerily:

"It's just far enough from breakfast time so I'm sure you will enjoy a cup of cocoa and a sample of Filigree biscuit, the soda cracker that is as filling as beefsteak yet as delicious and dainty as bonbons. Crisp, tasty, healthful and satisfying. Try one—and you will want more. There is no obligation to buy; in fact I simply demonstrate these, I do not sell them. But you

can get them in the store—and the price is one of the few prices that have not gone up on account of the war."

The two women drew close to the table and sampled the biscuit.

"It is delicious," they agreed. "I think I'll want a couple of boxes of the luncheon biscuit," said one. "I'll need some dessert wafers," the other decided.

Mr. Orchard approached.

"How much are your Filigree luncheon wafers?" he was asked.

"Thirteen cents a box, madam," he responded.

"And the dessert wafers?"

"Twenty-three cents."

"Very well, I'll take two boxes of the luncheon crackers. And I'll want two of the dessert ones."

"I'm sure Mr. Orchard has made a mistake," said Delia, sweetly; "he must have got Filigree mixed with something else, because the retail price of luncheon biscuit is ten cents and of dessert wafers twenty, just the same as before the war. The Filigree Company has actually reduced the wholesale price by more efficient methods of manufacture, so that the retailer could make a cent more on each box without increasing the price. Didn't you make a mistake, Mr. Orchard?"

"Well, I—h-m—I—why of course, I was thinking of another brand. Filigree is still the same. How many packages did you say?" He turned to the customers, his ruddy face somewhat purpled. "Was there anything else?"

"Yes," one of the women replied, "I want two pounds of prunes, a pound of American cheese, a pound of lima beans, and a pound of butter. How much will that be?"

"Let's see," said the grocer, "prunes, fifty cents; cheese, forty-five cents; beans, twenty-six cents; creamery butter, fifty-five cents. One dollar and seventy-six cents."

"My," exclaimed the woman, "things are high, aren't they?"

Orchard shook his head sadly.

"Yes," he admitted, "they are high. It's on account of the war, you know."

Delia, busying herself with some other customers who lingered at her table, never-

theless had an ear for the conversation. Also she was humming lightly a tune which gradually percolated to Orchard's sensibilities.

He had heard it played in a show he saw recently. What was it? Oh—once again his face grew somewhat purple. He had recognized the tune. It was: "Going Up." Delia, glancing at the grocer's broad back, noted with satisfaction the full red creeping up his fat neck. Evidently he "got her."

But he went on filling out the bill for the other customer, who wanted two pounds of corn meal, a pound of wheat flour, a loaf of bread, and two dozen eggs.

"Corn meal, twenty cents; flour, ten cents; bread, eleven cents; two dozen eggs, one dollar and fifty cents," murmured the grocer, keeping his voice so low that Delia couldn't hear him.

Somehow that girl worried him. Of course he was running his own business, and it wasn't any of her affair, but she knew too darn much about prices. It was too bad a man couldn't make a decent profit without a snip of a girl butting in.

As the two women started out with their purchases, Delia signaled them to stop a moment. Orchard, who had turned to wait on other patrons, turned back to watch her.

He was so intent on her actions that one of the customers, a nervous little woman, walked out, sniffing. She wasn't going to be kept waiting while a grocer stared at a pretty demonstrator. This gave Orchard jolt enough so that he forgot Delia and attended to the other woman.

"I just thought these might be useful to you," Delia was saying to the two women, as she handed them each a sheet of paper.

"I always have them mailed to me whenever I am demonstrating. You see, the Filigree Company feels that as long as it is doing everything possible to keep its prices down and help win the war, it ought to help the public with what information it can."

"What is this?" queried the taller woman.

"It's just the Federal Food Board Bulletin which shows what wholesale prices

are and what retail prices are supposed to be in certain localities. You can find the cost of nearly any article you buy in it. They're very handy, sometimes."

"How interesting," agreed the first woman. "I wonder if it says anything about the prices on what I got this morning." She looked it over. "Prunes, wholesale, fifteen cents; retail, nineteen cents; American cheese, wholesale, twenty-seven cents; retail, thirty-three cents; lima beans, wholesale, seventeen; retail, twenty cents; creamery butter, wholesale, forty-three cents; retail, forty-eight. H-m."

She opened her purse and glanced at the bill she had just paid. Her face clouded.

The other woman was making a similar comparison, with similar results, except that she snorted: "The robber!"

Delia chuckled.

"It isn't always the middleman who sticks you, is it?" she remarked. "The little fellow around the corner sometimes gets his."

The smaller woman, whose face had set in lines of stern determination, nodded.

"I know one who's going to get his now," she promised, and she marched back to where Orchard was standing. Her companion followed.

"Mr. Orchard," she said, "I've decided I don't want any of this stuff. I've just learned that you're soaking me from fifteen to fifty per cent more than a fair profit on what I'm getting and I'm not going to stand for it."

Her voice was raised, and every customer in the store heard it.

"Eggs should be fifty cents a dozen and you've charged me seventy-five cents, corn meal should be eight cents a pound and you've made it ten cents, and so on for everything. I'm willing to pay my share of the extra cost of things on account of the war, but I don't see any reason why you shouldn't bear part of it yourself instead of putting it all on your customers and adding ten or twenty or thirty per cent more for good measure."

Orchard, startled, nevertheless remained the suave merchant.

"You are very much mistaken, madam," he replied. "My prices are fair. I'm

afraid you've been deceived by some of the sensational newspapers talking about profiteers."

For answer the woman thrust the Federal Food Board list into his hand. "That's not a sensational newspaper," she said.

"Oh, that," he responded easily—"that list leads lots of people astray. Those are theoretical prices made up by a lot of college professors and impractical people like that."

"All right," agreed the woman, "if you can prove that, I'm satisfied. Just show me your bills from the wholesaler and whatever they are, I'll agree to pay you ten per cent more than the margin of profit allowed by the food board, on condition that if the wholesale price you pay is the same or less than the food board wholesale prices, you let me have the things for ten per cent less than that margin. That's a fair bet, as my husband would say."

The grocer's suavity disappeared.

"I haven't time to monkey with such things," he growled. "I'm too busy. If you don't want those articles, leave them."

She left them—and her friend left hers. Both went out, followed by nearly all the customers who had heard her voice.

Most of them knew her, and there was an excited conclave on the sidewalk outside the store as they clustered about her to read the Food Board bulletin. Presently the group dissolved, several of them to come in to Delia's table and ask her if she had any more of the bulletins.

"All you like," said Delia; "our company sees that all its salesmen and demonstrators have lots of these. Food will win the war, you know. If you write to the Food Board they'll send you bulletins right along."

The bevy of women withdrew and quiet reigned in the Home Grocery for a minute. But only for a minute, because Orchard, more purple than ever, descended upon Delia wrathfully.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Whaddyuh mean butting into my business and driving my customers out?"

"Butting into your business!" repeated Delia, innocently. "Far be it from me, far, oh very far be it from me to do that."

"I'm only an honest working girl demonstrating Filigree Biscuit, the daintiest, crispest, most satis—"

"Can that chatter," grumped Orchard. "You know what I mean. You set all those women by the ears and started all this row."

"Row?" said Delia. "I didn't make any row. I was standing here as calm and as cool as the well-known cucumber—not so well known since the price went up—when the lady began to read the riot act to you."

"Yes, and you gave her the idea by handing her that devilish bulletin," shouted Orchard. "You egged her on to jump me about my prices."

"No, you're wrong, Algernon, all wrong," Delia informed him. "I didn't egg her on. I couldn't afford to egg her on with the price you charge for eggs here. All I did was to give her a bulletin and tell her it sometimes came handy. Wasn't I right? Didn't she find it handy?"

"Well, I don't want any more of it," decreed Orchard. "You're here to demonstrate Filigree Biscuit, not to run my business for me."

Delia's eyes glowed, but her reply was: "Sir!" said the lady, "I may be only a demonstrator, but I have my feelings. And no fat pirate camouflaged as a grocer can pull any of that rough stuff on me. Listen, my dear Mr. Bandit, I'm working for the Filigree Biscuit Company and you have a nice little contract with them which says that I'm to demonstrate here for one week, beginning to-day. Well, I've begun, and I intend to finish. Better men than you have tried to get me fired, and it didn't work. And there isn't anything in the contract which says that I can't talk to the customers, or hand them literature as I choose."

"But it's literature that's damaging to my business. Why, I could sue your company and—"

"Sue!" exclaimed Delia. "That's a merry idea. Sure, why not. You trot right back to the office and call up your lawyer. Tell him all about it. Tell him that you want to sue the Filigree Biscuit Company because Delia Dean is handing your cus-

tomers bulletins which show how much food costs, and that's it's damaging your business, because you're grabbing twenty-five or fifty per cent more than a fair profit and if all your customers discover that, you won't be able to get away with it. Tell him the food bulletin is seditious literature, dangerous to the peace and security of the business of grand and petty larceny and you want five million dollars damages. Then come back and whisper in my lily ear what he says."

Orchard, choking, glared at her—but was speechless.

"You make me very, very tired," Delia went on. "You boast about doing your bit because you bought a few bonds, which are about the finest investment you could possibly get, and then you're doing your Sunday school best to help the Kaiser by hogging profits and holding up families for the necessities of life. You sell war-savings stamps over the counter, and take so much away from the people who buy groceries from you that they can't afford to get the stamps. Great is the Kaiser and the profiteer is his prophet."

"I'm a good loyal American," Orchard defended.

"You're a bunk patriot," Delia answered, her eyes flashing. "It's men like you who do more harm than all the soap-box orators put together. Wake up, old top, wake up! Didn't you ever stop to think that every time you put an extra ten per cent in your pocket you don't really earn, you're making it ten per cent harder for other people to back up the boys over there in the trenches? Instead of getting yours you ought to be giving yours! A good loyal American—you're about as loyal as Benedict Arnold. He sold out his country for a lump sum; you're helping to sell it out a little at a time, retail prices—fifty per cent too high."

The grocer's round face had lost its rudeness. It was slightly pale, and he wet his lips. There was a puzzled look in his eyes.

"Those are pretty hard words, Miss Dean," he finally remarked. "I don't think you're quite fair. Still—" he paused a moment. "Still, I must admit I hadn't thought of things the way you put them."

Business is business, you know, and I am doing business to make money."

"Nobody wants to keep you from making money," said Delia. "You're entitled to do that, we all are. But we aren't entitled to make anything extra out of the war."

"A man is entitled to what he gets," insisted the grocer.

"It depends on how he gets it," Delia replied. "And in these piping times of war people aren't asking 'How much have you got?' but 'Why have you got so much?'"

He thought this over a bit.

"What if they do?" he said. "That won't affect your bank balance, will it?"

"Oh," said Delia, "that's where your heart is, eh? Very well then, I'm going to can this patriotic line and slip you the sort of dope you'll understand. I'd like to keep on appealing to you for your country's sake until you came to grace, but life is short and a wad of bills has no patriotism. So here is the proposition in simple commercial language.

"This isn't a very large suburb and the people know each other mighty well. And the dames who went out of here this morning are slipping the rest of their friends an earful about the way you were caught with the goods this morning. Is that going to help your trade? The answer is no. Judging by the sort of chin and eyes that little lady has who gave you the ranakabo this A.M., she's going to make life for you anything but a tender lullaby hereafter."

Orchard nodded, reluctantly.

"She's a Tartar when she gets started," he agreed. "Suffragette leader and everything."

"Very well then," Delia continued. "I've got a way out for you. You can beat her to it."

"How?"

"Is there a local daily here?"

"Yes."

"Then you're going to take a full page in it to-morrow morning and announce that the Home Grocery will hereafter be the 'Win-the-War' store—the grocery that made the food bulletins famous, and you'll guarantee to maintain Food Board prices

in everything. You'll fill up your windows with placards to that effect and plaster your wagons with the same legend, and thereby you'll queer the determined dame's attempt to queer you, get the jump on the other grocers in Midvale, and have the people coming in here in droves and you'll make more money to buy bonds with than you thought there was in the burg. There's nothing in this high-class trade stuff any more, believe me. The rich dames are beginning to watch the prices of things as close as the poor ones always had to—and that sort of campaign I suggest will increase your cash business so much you'll wear out the register in a month. How about it?"

"It does sound rather good," Orchard admitted. "Maybe I'll try it."

"Maybe!" cried Delia. "You mean 'sure thing you'll try it.' I'm offering you a chance to save your life and make money doing it, and you say maybe you'll take the chance. Come on now, be a businessman and make up your mind to do the only thing you can do. Can't you hear your pocketbook urging you on to high deeds of patriotism—helping the people to save by selling three times as much goods at half the profit? Do you have to have ideas nailed into your head?"

"Well," Orchard smiled, "if I did, you certainly would be some hammer swinger. I'll do it. And I'm sorry I spoke so rough a while ago. You sure are a wise young person. By George, I'd like to have you work for me. Brains ain't so frequent around a grocery-store as a man would like. What salary would you want to be sort of general-assistant in the Home Grocery?"

"Ten thousand a year," replied Delia.

"Gosh!" said Orchard, "you're kidding."

"Nope," said Delia, "I'm serious."

"But I'll bet you're not getting anything like that from Filigree."

"No," said Delia.

"Then why—"

"Well," said Delia, "I like my job with Filigree pretty much and I wouldn't care to change. Besides," she grinned, "the price of brains is going up—on account of the war!"